

Clark's Island

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Postscripts by Jack Post

It is possible, but hardly probable, that if you live on Clark's Island you are not a Watson by birth or marriage. Watsons have lived there since 1690, and they have guarded their heritage with care, allowing almost no one to penetrate the family defenses and establish even a precarious foothold in their domain. True, the gulls have established rookery rights on the northeast promontory in such numbers that no man would dare dispute their raucous claims; but among men, the musty deed to John Watson from the Plymouth colony has dominated the succession from that day to this, until very recently Sarah Wingate Taylor deeded "Cedarfield," the acres around the old farmhouse, and a considerable section of the hill in the center of the island, to a trust administered by the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society.

A handful of houses on the east shore look toward Saquish, until recently a deserted beach, but now sprouting bungalows and cabins behind each dune. No construction goes forward on Clark's Island, though, and except for the cove around which the houses cluster, the island has reverted to wilderness, not yet rivalling the primeval forest of Pilgrim times, but dense enough to prevent a man on foot from penetrating the interior fastness except by the ancient paths that cut from shore to shore close to the stone walls that mark the edges of fields once painstakingly cleared by hand.

No house presently standing on the island goes back to Pilgrim times, but at "Cedarfield," built in 1830, Sarah Wingate Taylor in the last generation furthered her great interest in local history and the arts by holding summer seminars there for artists and writers. Herself a poet, she encouraged others to remember and write of our past; and after her death, she left "Cedarfield" with an endowment to maintain the ancient homestead and to educate coming generations in the lore of their forefathers.

Now each year, mindful of its trust, the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society selects a summer Sunday for a great picnic on Clark's Island when a mid-day full tide will allow dozens of small boats to beach their passengers close to "Cedarfield." The sailors splash ashore laden with hampers and baskets, unpack them on the grass, and after they have feasted, inspect the old house before following the grassy paths up to Election Rock, the huge outcropping where on that bleak December 20 of 1620 the Pilgrims elected to hold their first service ashore in the new world. In the summer sun, the people of the present hold another service in commemoration of those first settlers of New England.

Clark's Island with its rocky shores, its screaming gulls, and its few houses all limited to one family, contrasts strangely with the bustle of onrushing civilization evident in Plymouth and Duxbury, overpowering a few miles along the highway toward Boston. The Indians, that the explorers of 1620 feared, might still lurk in the dense thickets of the island. The tide still washes around the same boulders, and in the winter, when the last of the summer people have retreated to the mainland, time becomes meaningless, and change only the gradual erosion of nature. Ducks raft on the flats toward High Pines, and geese from the north circle and light off the east point, just as they have before the first shallop coasted along the shore from the Mayflower anchored under the protecting tip of the cape just visible across the bay. Here at Clark's Island we can live the past and comprehend the rigors of primitive life that imparted strength to our ancestors. Perhaps we can even adapt some of their fortitude to ourselves.